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## A pragmatic analysis of thanking strategies among Kurdish speakers of Ilam based on gender and age

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### Abstract

Thanking is one of the most commonly used speech act and major instruments which strengthen the bonds between the members of a society. This study attempted to study the most frequently- used thanking strategies in Ilami Kurdish language. To this end, a DCT (discourse completion task) will be applied. DCT represents various scenarios where the participants are asked to write down the terms they use to thank others. The participants involve 117 people from different walks of life, poor or rich, educated or uneducated, young or old, and the like. The analysis of data based on Cheng's (2005) taxonomy of 8 strategies to express gratitude. To analysis the collected data both descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized. The results revealed that 'thanking', 'positive feeling' and 'appreciation' were the most frequently used strategies among subjects of under 30 years respectively and 'thanking', 'positive feeling' and 'appreciation' were common used strategies among subjects of above 30 years respectively. Regarding the gender of participants 'thanking', 'positive feeling' and 'appreciation' were the most frequently used strategies among male subjects respectively and in responding to thanking strategies 'thanking' and 'positive feeling' were the general tendency of females participant. EFL learners can be benefited from these findings to develop their pragmatic competence.

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### 1. Introduction

Speech act is the performance of a certain behavior, such as thanking, apology, refusal, or greeting, through words. "Speech acts are realized from culture to culture indifferent ways and these differences may result in

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communication difficulties that range from the humorous to the serious” (Gass and Neu 2006). Speech acts are very culture specific and people from different cultures have different norms to express their gratitude, apology, compliments, refusals, etc. These differences can result in cross cultural stereotypes well as miscommunication among individuals. Gass&Selinker (2008, p.288) pointed out that all “languages have a means of performing speech acts and presumably speech acts themselves are universals, yet the form used in specific speech acts varies from culture to culture”. However, people sometimes perceive and evaluate the behavior of others from different cultures differently as sometimes being insincere and they feel that some people may “overdo their friendliness” (ibid). Wolfson (1986) notion that speech acts are different in many aspects such as cross culturally, the way they are realized, their distribution, and their frequency of occurrence and in the function they serve.

Brown and Levinson (1978) have enriched the literature by introducing a politeness theory that is based on the concept of ‘face’. They defined ‘face’ as “the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (1978: 61). They claim that there are two aspects of this ‘face’: ‘positive face’ and ‘negative face’ (ibid). ‘Positive face’ is defined as a desire to be valued and appreciated while ‘negative face’ is defined as the desire to have freedom from imposition. In any human interaction, people may threaten others' face because it competes against one's desires and needs. Brown and Levinson called this a Face Threatening Act (FTA).

According to many scholars, the speech act of thanking is a universal illocution across languages and cultures (Coulmas, 1981; Aijmer, 1996; & Schneider, 2005). Jautz points out that gratitude expressions are used "when a speaker wants the addressee to know that s/he is grateful for what the addressee has said or done" (Jautz, 2008, p 142). Aijmer (1996) states that expressing gratitude is considered a stereotypical speech act because the form of thank you or thanks is almost always used by speakers every time they want to express gratitude (1996, p.78). Jung (1994) adds in his paper on speech acts of thanking that gratitude expression has the effect of enhancing rapport between the interlocutors. He states that some gratitude expressions may serve different functions depending on the situation such as “conversational openings, stopping, leave takings and offering positive reinforcement (ibid).

Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) refer to Rubin's (1983) analysis of the different functions of the phrase thank you. Rubin (1983) showed the different uses of the phrase thank you, such as complimenting or signaling the closing of a conversation, or a “bald” thank you at service encounters. (As cited in Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986). One important aspect of pragmatic competence is the production and understanding of speech acts and their appropriateness in a given situation (Cheng, 2005). Austin (1962) defines speech acts as the actions performed in saying something. According to Austin's theory, these “functional units in communication” have propositional or locutionary meaning (the literal meaning of the utterance), illocutionary meaning (the social function of the utterance), and perlocutionary force (the effect produced by the utterance in a given context) (p.384). Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) have identified thanking as an illocutionary act under Searle's classification of speech act. Their study indicates that an expression of gratitude is:

“An illocutionary act performed by a speaker which is based on a past act performed by the hearer. This past act benefits the speaker and the speaker believes it to have benefited him or her. The speaker feels grateful or appreciative, and makes a statement which counts as an expression of gratitude (ibid).”

However, not all expressions using the word ‘thank you’ refer to gratitude (Eisenstein and Bodman, 1993). They can also refer to other language functions such as compliments and closings (Rubin, 1983). Even the use of thanking might differ from culture to culture. For instance, ‘thank you’ used in American English is more common as an expression of gratitude while in British English it is more a formal marker (Hymes, 1972, cited in Eisenstein and Bodman, 1993). As Coulmas (1981) puts it: “The social relation of the participants and the inherent properties of the object of gratitude work together to determine the degree of gratefulness that should be expressed in a given situation. Differences in this respect are obviously subject to cultural variation” (p.75). Saying thank you is a problem not only for native speakers, but also for second language learners who need to know when and how to thank in the target culture (Bodman and Eisenstein, 1988; Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986, 1993).The problem is typically considered in terms of when and how thanking is an appropriate response to the social situation (Cheng, 2005). Kumar (2001) highlights the significance of expressions of gratitude in the following word:

“Expressions of gratitude in the normal day-to-day interactions between the members of a society seem obviously to fall in the category of the “social” use of language. Expressions of gratitude and politeness are a major instrument the use of which keeps the bonds between the members of a society well-cemented and strong. They are used profusely and

extensively both side by side with and in addition to reciprocating actions. Many are the occasions when we to be deprived of the opportunity to use an expression of gratitude, we would feel cheated and betrayed.” (p. 6)

Other studies have shown that even advanced learners have difficulty adequately expressing gratitude (Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986, 1993; Hinkel, 1994). Moreover, while there is a large body of literature on requests and some on apologies, the speech act of thanking has not been studied much (Kasper and Blum-Kulka, 1993:59).

As Grant and Gino (2010) point out, gratitude is ubiquitous in our social life. In most societies, expressing gratitude properly has important social value, which attends to the positive face of the benefactor. However, the way that gratitude is expressed is mainly determined by socio-cultural values and conventions governing each society. For example, while Americans favor explicit thanking (see Eisenstein & Bodman, 1993), “Chinese seem to be too reserved to express their gratitude openly and explicitly” (Wong, 2010, p.1243). The practice of gratitude has some benefits, e.g., they help people to cope with stressful situations better, and to strengthen social relationships (Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade, 2005). Eisenstein and Bodman (1993) asserted that when this function is expressed appropriately, it can create feelings of warmth and solidarity among interactions, maintaining and enhancing social cohesion and social bonding in the society. Any failure to express gratitude (or to express it adequately) could have negative social consequences for interlocutors’ relationships, leading to irritation, resentment and annoyance (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986).

We usually thank people for favors and/or services that we receive, which are labeled as “object(s) of gratitude” (Coulmas, 1981b). The type and nature of an object of gratitude determines how elaborate the expression of gratitude should be. For example, the object of gratitude for an action that leads to saving somebody’s life is quite different from that following somebody’s action in holding the door open behind him/her for another person to pass through. As Coulmas (1981b) notes sincere verbalization of gratitude is directed to some action (or actions) of a ‘benefactor’ or to a result of this action.

This study is carried out with an attempt to study thanking strategy in Ilami Kurdish language. Although many investigations have paid attention to various speech acts, little research is available on speech act of thanking, more particularly in Kurdish. It is thought that since speech acts vary from one culture to another (Gass and Neu, 2006; Green, 1975; Wierzbicka, 1985), this might give rise to misunderstanding and troubles in establishing successful communications.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Research questions and hypotheses*

1. What are the most frequently used thanking strategies among male and female Kurdish speakers?
2. What are the most frequently used thanking strategies among Kurdish speakers with regards to age?

### *2.2. Related hypotheses*

1. There is no meaningful difference between male and female Kurdish speakers in using than thanking strategies.
2. There is no meaningful difference between above and under 30 years Kurdish speakers in using than thanking strategies.

### *2.3. Participants*

The current study involved 117 subjects of Kurdish people in Ilam, Iran, consisting of 62 male and 55 female subjects (98 Kurdish speakers, 19 Persian speakers, 72 above 30 years old, 45 under 30 years old, 27diploma and A.A, 59 B.A, 31 M.A and PhD ) who were chosen randomly to participate in this study.

### *2.4. Instrument*

The discourse completion task was first used to examine pragmatic speech act realizations by Blum-Kulka (1982). Since then it has become one of the most frequently used data elicitation instruments in inter language

pragmatic research (Kasper, 1998; Bardovi-Harlig, 1999; Kasper and Rose, 2002). A questionnaire was designed based on Cheng (2005) and some articles. This questionnaire consisted of twenty five different situations. It was designed in Persian and participants were asked to answer in Persian. The DCT presents different scenarios where the participants are asked to display different thanking expressions they use in Kurdish under those circumstances they provide to thanking expressions.

By using the DCT, researchers can control independent variables such as age, gender, and social status (e.g. Blum-Kulka, House and Kasper, 1989). The researchers believe that the DCT can be useful instrument for providing a preliminary look at cultural preferences in the performance of thanking, such as what the present study attempts to do. The data of this study was collected through a controlled elicitation method based on a questionnaire which is a modified version of Discourse completion task by Cheng (2005). In so doing, the validity of this research is ensured. For checking the reliability, Cronbach's Alpha was estimated. The value for Alpha coefficient was 0.78 which is an acceptable figure.

### 2.5. Procedures

The Discourse Compliment Test (DCT) had been conducted to elicit thanking strategy. The DCT was administered to 117 subjects in Ilam city, Iran. To elicit the information, a questionnaire was designed based on Cheng (2005). The participants were asked to complete the DCT based on the twenty five situations presented. They were asked to fill out the instrument and display different thanking expressions they use in Kurdish. In this study, for collecting the data, questionnaire in the form of paper was spread up to different subjects.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Descriptive statistics

In the following, the subjects employed strategies based on gender, age, education level, and dominant language, are presented.

#### 3.1.1. The frequency of the subject's thanking responses based on gender

Table 1 presents the subjects' thanking responses based on their gender.

Table 1. The Frequency distribution of subjects' thanking responses based on gender

Gender		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	Apology	1	1.6	1.6
	Positive feeling	17	27.4	29.0
	Thanking	28	45.2	74.2
	Appreciation	14	22.6	96.8
	recognition of imposition	2	3.2	100.0
	Total	62	100.0	
Female	Appreciation	3	5.5	5.5
	Thanking	25	45.5	50.9
	positive feelings	18	32.7	83.6
	Apology	8	14.5	98.2
	recognition of imposition	1	1.8	100.0
	Total	55	100.0	

As this table reveals, out of the total number of 62 collected thanking responses, 'thanking', 'positive feeling' and 'appreciation' were the most frequently used strategies among male subjects respectively. The same table shows that 'thanking', and 'positive feeling', were the most popular employed strategies among female subjects respectively.

### 3.1.2. The frequency of the subjects' thanking responses regarding the age of the participant

Table 2 presents the subjects' thanking responses based on their age.

Table 2. The frequency distribution of subjects' thanking responses based on age

Age		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Under 30 years	Apology	3	4.2	4.2
	Positive feeling	26	36.1	40.3
	Thanking	27	37.5	77.8
	appreciation	14	19.4	97.2
	recognition of imposition	2	2.8	100.0
	Total	72	100.0	
Above 30 years	Apology	1	2.2	2.2
	Positive feeling	16	35.6	37.8
	Thanking	19	42.2	80.0
	appreciation	8	17.8	97.8
	recognition of imposition	1	2.2	100.0
	Total	45	100.0	

As this table display, out of the total number of 72 collected thanking responses, 'thanking', 'positive feeling' and 'appreciation' were the most frequently used strategies among subjects of under 30 years respectively. the same table shows that 'thanking', 'positive feeling' and 'appreciation' were the most frequently used strategies among subjects of above 30 years respectively.

### 3.2. Inferential Statistics

The mean and standard deviation of male and female participants are presented in the following table.

Table 3. Mean and Standard deviation of thanking strategy in participant

Gender		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Thanking strategy	male	62	60.7258	19.19116	2.43728
	female	55	54.2727	19.91320	2.68509

T-test was run to investigate the relationship between genders and thanking strategy (following table).

Table 4. T-test to investigate the relationship between gender and thanking strategy

	F	Sig	T	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.038	0.846	1.783	115	0.077	6.45308	3.61823	-0.71394	13.62010
Equal variances not assumed			1.780	112.21	0.078	6.45308	3.62630	-0.73183	13.63799

As shown in Table 4, it is observed that the difference between participants' *thanking strategy* is not significant among males and females ( $\text{Sig} = 0.07 > 0.05$ ,  $t = 1.78$ ). Accordingly, the first hypothesis is rejected, that is, there is no significant difference between the participants' *thanking strategy* and their gender. To deal with the second independent variable the following two tables are presented.

The mean and standard deviation of above and under 30 years participants are presented in the following table.

Table 5. Mean and Standard deviation of *thanking strategy* of participants in terms of age

Gender		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Thanking strategy	Under 30 years	72	57.8333	19.59520	2.30932
	Above 30 years	45	57.4667	20.12868	3.00061

T-test was run to investigate the relationship between genders and *thanking strategy* (following Table).

Table 6. T-test to investigate the relationship between age and *thanking strategy*

	F	Sig	t	Df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.153	0.696	0.097	115	0.923	0.36667	3.76277	-7.08666	7.81999
Equal variances not assumed			0.097	91.637	0.923	0.36667	3.78637	-7.15378	7.88712

As the results in Table 6 reveal, the difference between participants' *thanking strategy* is not significant among above and under 30 years old subjects ( $\text{Sig} = 0.92 > 0.05$ ,  $t = 0.09$ ). So, the second hypothesis is rejected and it can be concluded that there is no significant difference between age of the participants and their *thanking strategy*.

#### 4. Discussion

The present study sought to explore *thanking strategies* among Kurdish people in Ilam. The results indicated that out of the total number of 62 collected *thanking responses*, 'thanking', 'positive feeling' and 'appreciation' were the most frequently used strategies among male subjects respectively. Also the results showed that 'thanking', and 'positive feeling', were the most popular employed strategies among female subjects respectively. In this study females were willing to express their gratitude to their hearers using 'positive feeling' and 'thanking strategies' but males tend to express their gratitude to others using 'positive feeling', 'thanking' and 'appreciation' strategies. Females tend to express themselves in their daily interactions, whereas the reason that males do not express emotions appears to be the vulnerability they may face which can affect their autonomy, as found by Froh, Yurkewicz, and Kashdan (2009) that females experienced and expressed gratitude more than male did.

The second research question was dealing with the most frequently used *thanking strategies* among subjects' *thanking responses* based on age? the findings revealed that 'thanking', 'positive feeling' and 'appreciation' were the most frequently used strategies among subjects of under 30 years respectively and 'thanking', 'positive feeling' and 'appreciation' were the most frequently used strategies among subjects of above 30 years respectively. As far as I'm concerned, it can be said that both groups had same and enough cognitive knowledge about politeness strategies and speech act and they tend to make others in every situation to observe rule of politeness like 'thanking', 'positive feeling' and 'appreciation'. The findings obtained for second research question revealed that age of Kurdish people in Ilam is not an effective factor in using their *thanking strategies*. This finding is consistent with research by Murni Mahmud (2013) which indicated that that age has not role in the use of *thanking strategies*.

According to the results obtained in this study, it can be said that the independent variables such as: gender and age didn't have effect on using thanking strategies by people in Ilam. The general result of this study is somewhat in harmony with results of the use of thanking strategies among Iranian EFL learners of different proficiency levels by Yasami and Rastegar (2014) and Expressions of Gratitude: A Case of EFL Learners by Pishghadam and Zarei (2011). They found that participants use more thanking and positive feeling than other strategies.

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